

## **Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

### **Background**

The Northern Territory covers a large geographical area with a relatively small but growing population. With the exception of the Northern Territory University, none of the other post-secondary institutions in the NT have a dedicated disability support officer.

In many of the regional locations throughout the Northern Territory, services are limited or non-existent. The combination of lack of services, an indigenous population who have significant vision and hearing impairment problems due to the non-treatment of primary infections, as well as geographical/seasonal isolation, all together makes the Northern Territory an inhospitable environment for people with disabilities.

The student profile of Batchelor Institute illustrates the dimension of the problem. Batchelor Institute draws the majority of its students from remote communities across northern Australia, mainly from within the Northern Territory but also from northern Queensland and Western Australia. The total student enrolment in '2000' was approximately 2500, and surveys show that the most prevalent disability experienced is hearing loss with deafness or partial deafness affecting over 60%, other disabilities make up a further 30% of the student population. Due to the socio-economic, health and education status of the communities, the incidence of other disabilities is higher than that experienced elsewhere.

Currently there are seven major Post Secondary Educational Environments in the NT. Three of which, are specifically funded for indigenous students Educational Environments as follows:

- Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (multi regional campuses)
- Centre for Appropriate Technology.
- Centralian College (multi regional campuses)
- Institute for Aboriginal Development
- Casuarina Senior College
- Northern Territory Rural College
- Northern Territory University (multi regional campuses)

### **Terms of Reference**

With regards to the "Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities", I would like to make the following comments and concerns with respect to the "Terms of Reference"

### ***Terms of Reference***

***a) whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs, included but not limited to:***

- ***the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap:***
  1. The need to develop a nationally agreed definition of disability, inclusive of all areas, for both compulsory and non-compulsory education sectors to allow for portability and transference of skills for long life learning.
  2. Given that two students who may possess the same level of handicap can have such varying needs where one may require little or no support and the other high support, it may be a more accurate reflection of need and cost to assess support required rather than level of handicap.
  
- ***The accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed:***
  1. Methods used to assess student's disability should be consistent across the nation.
  2. Who should administer the assessments and whose responsibility is it to cover the costs?
  3. Approximately 28% of the Northern Territory population are of indigenous origins and over 85% of the total number of indigenous students enrolled in tertiary academic programs identify as students with a disability. Therefore, it is imperative that any particular assessment tools or criteria be culturally sensitive.
  4. Given our small population dispersed over such a vast area, and that we have TAFE annexes/campuses in rural and remote areas, how would assessments be carried out and who will be responsible for the extra costs associated with the processing of these assessment in remote areas?
  5. Also given the specialisation of some of the assessments and the need for continuity across the nation, who would be able to conduct assessments?
  
- ***The particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas:***
  1. The Northern Territory nationally has the largest proportion of its population being of indigenous origin, that being approximately 28%. Over 85% of the total number of indigenous students enrolled in tertiary academic programs identify as students with a disability.

2. The NT is made up of approximately 1257 Communities. It is divided into four quarters; Central, Northern, Tiwi and Anindilyakwa. It must be appreciated and respected that the four regions differ greatly in culture and language. Within the NT there have been identified at least 37-40 major languages hence 37-40 various forms of sign language plus Auslan.
3. For all students with disabilities in rural and remote areas, resources are always a priority and a contentious issue. Local networking is the backbone of appropriate support and successful outcomes for people with disabilities.
4. 'Disability identification' or 'disclosure' is a topic of much discussion for all students. For all students the concern of actually identifying their disability in fear of unknown ramifications or they live in such an isolated part of the NT that there are no supports other than immediate family. In these instances students with disabilities that could go on to further TAFE or higher education courses, choose not to because they believe that their family already provide too much assistance.
5. Many Australians of Indigenous origin do not actually realise that they may have an impairment, resultant from health issues, because they have compensated for it all their life. It doesn't become an obstacle until later on when individuals enter educational pathways and their disability has an impact on their ability to learn.
6. Many young indigenous people with disabilities do not attend compulsory schooling thus do not have the skills to even participate, access and attain in a Certificate 1 course.
7. Marketing of information regarding educational opportunities for students with disabilities in rural and remote areas, and how this information is accessed is of concern.
8. There should be a Disability Liaison Officer in each of the Indigenous Tertiary Education sectors within the Northern Territory.

- ***The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs.***

1. Accessibility for students, especially for those of indigenous origin in rural and remote areas.
2. Who would provide an early intervention service in rural and remote areas?
3. Who would be responsible for covering the extra costs of providing such a service in rural and remote areas?

- ***Access to adequacy of funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students.***

1. This is to be throughout the student's educational life including through to higher education if that is their chosen pathway.
2. Without adequate funding to provide required support, students would be indirectly excluded from educational pathways especially those to university and TAFE.
3. The present funding for indigenous students with regards to TAFE and Higher Education courses doesn't allow for coverage of support costs with regards to indigenous students who have a disability. So the limited funding would exclude these students from following their chosen pathway especially with respect to their post secondary education.
4. Who will determine what is adequate funding to support an individual?

- ***The nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students.***

1. Who will be responsible for funding and administration of these programs, State and Territories or the Federal government?

- ***Teacher training and professional development***

1. Who will be responsible for the development and delivery of the teacher training and professional development?
2. How would training be provided, and by whom, in rural and remote areas?
3. Who would cover the extra costs intrinsically inherent when delivering training in rural and remote areas?

- ***Legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation***

1. Given the existing legislation and the increasing number of students in tertiary educational settings, identifying as having a disability, it is inevitable that the demand for an increase in resources will occur.
2. Given our legal obligations and the lack of infrastructure in some rural and remote areas of the Northern Territory this could have a significant impact on demand for an increase in resources for students choosing to access tertiary education.

***b) What the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities.***

1. Given that it is primarily the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government to fund education there is still a need to work collaboratively with states and territories to plan for future increases in resource demands so as to meet obligations under existing legislation.

2. Given existing legal obligations, the large indigenous population and the lack of infrastructure in rural and remote areas of the Northern Territory, it is immanent that a significant injection of resources will be required in the near future.